

Will Willimon
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Easter 4A
Psalm 23

I'm thankful that somebody cared enough about me to teach me to say Psalm 23, particularly that phrase, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*

How pleasant to come to church on a Spring Sunday and encounter an old friend.

Sometimes Sunday can be a jarring, discordant experience. You settle down into the pew only to be hit over the head by some unfamiliar idea, some alien biblical text, poked in the ribs by a pushy preacher peddling an even pushier biblical passage.

Not this Sunday. This sermon series on the 23rd Psalm offers us a meeting with an old familiar friend and carries us way back into the quaint, bygone world of sheep and shepherds.

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack for nothing.” I cannot remember when I did not know this Psalm. Can you? Even if a person knows no scripture by heart, can't find a verse when he needs it, knows this. I see the faded pastel picture from my third grade Sunday School class. Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Psalm 23 is the psalm of children, expressing a childlike trust in God's ability to protect us, just like a shepherd.

Here is the God who leads to rest in green pastures and beside still waters. Restful, reassuring. Sheep don't drink from dangerous, swift flowing rivers. This Shepherd finds just the right spot for the sheep to rest, to be restored.

But then suddenly, the sky turns dark, clouds gather and we find ourselves in “the darkest valley.” The pleasant mornings of childhood fade, we look down a gradually darkening corridor toward the end of life, and there to meet us is not a dark abyss of death, but the shepherd. Still, the rod and the staff, the strong arm of the shepherd are a comforting reassurance, even there.

As a pastor, I have been impressed, when life draws to a close for someone and it is their turn to walk through the valley, they inevitably reach out for this old friend, Psalm 23. It isn't simply because they know it by heart. It is because it dares to speak about the end, that dark valley, and names it as a place where the Good Shepherd comforts us. It's therefore a rare funeral where Psalm Twenty-Three has not been invited to speak a word or two over the grave.

When life made us wonder if God was there for us, if God cared, it was maternal/paternal Twenty-Three who put comforting arms around us and reassured us of a God who makes, leads, restores, comforts, prepares, anoints; so that in darkness or light, life or death, we might dwell with God.

Good old, familiar-since-childhood, reassuring Psalm Twenty-Three, who speaks of still waters and green pastures.

But wait. A closer look at our old friend reveals something I had not seen before. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all my days of my life.” That’s the way I was taught to say this psalm. But a look at the Hebrew reveals that, as is so often in the Bible, a word can be translated more than one way. Goodness?

The word has many nuances in the Old Testament. Goodness names all those benefits of God's presence. Even in the valley, it is good to know that God stands with us. Mercy? This is that beloved Hebrew word, *Hesed*. The prophets loved that word. *Hesed*. Often translated “steadfast love.” Mercy is the word for kindness, fidelity of God, even when we are not faithful. God's goodness and kindness follow us.

But the word that surprises is that word translated as “follow.” Goodness and kindness follow me. It’s surprising that the Hebrew can also be translated, and most often is translated in the Bible, as *pursue* me. Goodness and mercy *pursue* me.

Pharaoh’s chariots pursued the Children of Israel to the sea (Exodus 14:8). “I pursued my enemies and overtook them,” sang David after he had triumphed (Psalm 18:37). “Our pursuers were swifter than the vultures...they chased us on the mountains, they lay in wait for us in the wilderness” (Lamentations 4:19). Surely goodness and mercy *pursue* me, all the days of my life.

And for me, even in the presence of an old friend about whom I thought I knew everything, there is a ripple upon still waters. *Pursue* me. Here we are, plodding through life, and, oh yes, who’s that behind me? Oh, that’s goodness and mercy. They’re following me. Tagging along. Hmm. Looks to me as if they may be *pursuing* you. Follow or pursue? You make the call.

It’s much the same thought as in that wonderful poem:

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from Him,...
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.”
- Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*

There’s a difference between being “followed” and “pursued.” There’s a difference between looking back over your shoulder and finding dear old, predictable, goodness with mercy in tow, trudging up the hill behind you, and being jumped by a breathless goodness and mercy.

The Lord is my shepherd,” we say. The shepherd leads us down to the quiet, level pasture, knows where to find the quiet, restful brook whereby we can rest and be refreshed. But then Jesus told us about the shepherd who, when just one stupid sheep strayed from the fold, left the ninety-and-nine out in the wilderness (Luke 15:3-7) and *pursued* the one lost sheep until he found it. The Shepherd pursued until he found the lost.

“I lay down my life for the sheep,” said Jesus. Is there no limit to God’s pursuit of us, even unto death?

We knew him as a mean old man. Resentful. Bitter. Someone said that his bitterness was justified. His beloved wife died giving birth to their one child. The child died shortly thereafter from complications. "He has reason to be bitter," they said in town.

Never went to church. Never had anything to do with anyone. When, in his late sixties, they carried him out of his apartment and over to the hospital to die, no one visited, no flowers were sent. He went there to die alone.

There was this nurse. Well, she wasn't actually a nurse yet, just a student nurse.

She was in training and because she was in training she didn't know everything that they teach you in school about the necessity for detachment, the need for distance with your patients, boundaries. She befriended the old man. It had been so long since he had friends, he didn't know how to act with one. He told her, "Go away! Leave me alone!"

She would smile. Try to coax him to eat his Jell-O. At night, she would tuck him in. "Don't need nobody to help me," he would growl.

Soon, he grew so weak he had not the strength to resist her kindness. Late at night, after her duties were done, she would pull up a chair and sit by his bed and sing to him as she held his old, gnarled hand. And he looked up at her in the dim lamp light and wondered if he saw the face of a little one whom he never got to see as an adult. And a tear formed in his eye when she kissed him goodnight. And for the first time in forty, maybe fifty years, he said, "God bless you."

And as she left the room, two others remained, whispering softly in the old man's ear the last word he heard before slipping away into the dark valley. The word was "Gotcha!", whispered in unison by Goodness and Mercy.

We wander down crooked paths, bob like jetsam down some raging river, he has met us there, pursued us, even into the valley, "Gotcha!"

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